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ABSTRACT

The study described in this report was conducted to assess the intellectual development of adult learners in a community college using William Perry's cognitive development framework. After introductory material provides a rationale for the investigation of the intellectual development of adult students, the purpose of the study is presented. The next section provides a conceptual framework for the study, explaining Perry's schema of nine sequential positions of intellectual and ethical development; the six positions that comprise the dualistic and relativistic levels of development; and the views of learning and instruction that are characteristic of these positions. Next, study methodology is discussed, indicating that: (1) an essay test asking students to describe their ideal learning environment was used to test 50 students aged 22 or older in fall 1982; (2) independent raters gave a three-digit rank on dimensions of how respondents viewed knowledge, authority, and self; and (3) one-half hour long interviews were conducted with six respondents to clarify survey information, by asking students to discuss their reactions to a conflict situation regarding knowing/authority/self. The final section presents and discusses findings, looking at the positions of the respondents on the Perry Scheme of Cognitive Development and the relationship of age and major to ratings. This section also looks at the behavioral and attitudinal characteristics of students exemplifying various positions. (HB)

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The Perry Scheme: A New Perspective on Adult Learners

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Introduction

The investigation of the intellectual development of adult learners is a topic that is both timely and relevant to educators. It is timely in that the adult population is returning to post-secondary institutions at an accelerating rate, and most institutions are turning to this population to fill enrollment quotas as they become aware of the decline in the traditional age student. Investigation of the intellectual development of adults is relevant because we need diagnostic tools to meet the learning needs of the returning adult students. We cannot assume that individuals are at the higher stages of intellectual development because they have reached a mature chronological age. The college impact literature to date has addressed the development of the 18-22 year population far more adequately than it has addressed the adult population who are returning to school after experiencing the world of work/home-making for 2-20 years. We need to know more about the adult students we teach in order to be more effective teachers.

William Perry's developmental scheme has generated interest among higher education professionals within the past decade. Developed at Harvard and tested on undergraduates in longitudinal study, Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development forms a base for holistic testing of non-traditional learners. Although Perry developed his scheme from the observation/interviewing of traditional college-aged, Ivy-League students, he pointed to questions that superceded this population.

> Can this scheme be considered a relatively enduring outline of major vicissitudes in human experience from adolescence into adulthood in a pluralistic culture? Does it help us understand the way that "modern man" finds to address his predicament in a relativistic world?
>
> (Perry, 1970, p. x)

Only from repeated studies in diverse settings, with diverse populations, can we begin to develop answers to these questions. The Community College is an ideal institution in which to begin a holistic adult testing program. The Community College has always viewed adult learners as a significant focus of their mission to the lifelong learning needs of the community.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to describe in detail, using the Perry cognitive development framework, the cognitive positions of adult students in their first year in two year colleges and to suggest how these findings might be used to discuss faculty redirection. Adult learners will be defined as persons who enter college following several years of other activities, such as jobs, military, mothering, and is therefore older than the traditional age student.

Conceptual Framework

Of central interest in the work of William Perry is the sequential development of the student's cognitive structure through nine positions of intellectual and ethical development. Perry's scheme describes a sequence of positions in the development of thinking, identity and life style. Within that scheme, cognitive structure is defined as "essentially a set of assumptions which act as a filter dictating how the individual will perceive, organize and evaluate events in the environment, and, though less directly, how he/she will behave in response to those events" (Widick, 1977, p. 35). Perry describes the nine major positions of intellectual and ethical development grouped into three general categories: Dualism, Relativism, and Commitment.

Within these three general categories, this research measures the patterns of adult intellectual filters as they view knowledge, authority and themselves.

Positions one and two in the Perry Scheme represent a dualistic view of knowledge. The person in a dualist position assumes knowledge is either known or knowable and views himself as a receptacle ready to receive knowledge/truth from the authority/teacher who is required to give it to him. This student views the world in polar terms of we/they, right/wrong. Right answers exist for everything and are known to authority whose role is to know this truth and teach it. Perry researchers often refer to this view of authority as a belief structure held by the learner in which authority begins with a capital A.

The learner with a dualistic world view sees knowledge as "out there," as a set information and facts. His responsibility is to master the facts and demonstrate to the teacher that he has done so. As the student moves along within a dualistic structure, he accounts for uncertainty and diversity of opinion as confusion among poorly qualified authorities who should know, or as tasks set by authority so the students can find the right answers for themselves. (Knefelkam, L.L. and Selpitza, R., 1976)

Positions Three and Four represent a move toward multiplicity. Learners can incorporate more diversity of opinion, more multiples. Now a rapidly expanding gray area encroaches on the black and white Realm of Dualism. The learner recognizes that in some areas uncertainity and diversity of opinion are legitimate. At the early position, students are concerned with quantity -- time spent on preparation, number of pages, weights of evaluative areas for grading. Students become concerned with issues of fairness. A natural, but hardly positive, manifestation of this position is what Perry has referred to as the "do your own thing"

perspective. The student sees that he has no direct access to absolute truth, that the world he perceives is filtered through a particular frame, and that frame is only one of a variety of possible frames. He then infers that he is unable to evaluate another's views or beliefs; he is free only to agree or disagree. Beliefs become individual preferences. Even though the student is no longer a mere receptacle for authority's wisdom, he may still believe that opinions are determined rather than chosen. (Clinchy and Zimmerman, 1981)

At Position Four, students may believe that each teacher has an arbitrary, idiosyncratic way of thinking. Teachers try to inflict their personal styles on students. Many students feel angry and helpless. Students at this position do not use reason to construct their opinions. They see reasons as manufactured to please instructors; they do not convince the student. The student believes he takes a position that is "simply there" (from experience) or he selects one that is appealing to him. However, he is beginning to realize that what instructors want is complex, contextual reasoning and he must learn how to evaluate arguments in terms of formal criteria. Analytic tools make rational criticism possible.

The movement from dualistic thinking to relativistic thinking comes about gradually with gradations through Positions 1-4. Contextual relativism (Position Five) in the Perry Scheme is marked by what Perry refers to as "revolution." In the thought structure of the student, "Relativism is perceived as the common characteristic of all thought, all knowing, all of man's relation to his world." Against this pervasive field of contextual relativism, one perceives dualistically, right or wrong thinking becomes habitual over a period of time. All areas of life require a contextual approach and no matter what the situation the learner constructs a variety of interpretations and evaluations. The answer to everything is,

"it depends." Questions require examination from many perspectives. The learner now knows that complexity is real and he now has the tools of analysis and synthesis to match the complexity of the world. The learner must now make meaning for himself, knowledge can no longer be received from "on-high". At Position Five the learner can take on the responsibility for his own learning and accept information from other sources to construct one's own knowledge.

Methodology

The Syracuse Rating Group, a professional group of experts on rating learner responses on the Perry development scale, developed and validated an essay test (protocol) for use with adult students attending a local community college. Students tested were age 22 or older. This age was chosen for two reasons: (1) in the literature the traditional age college student is generally considered to be 18-22, and (2) Levinson's first adult stage of "leaving home" generally encompasses ages 17-22. Therefore we expect most of our respondents will have completed this task.

This protocol instrument was used to test 50 adult students in Fall, 1982; these essays were rated along positions on the Perry Scheme. Two independent raters read the essays and gave a three digit rank on dimensions of how respondents viewed knowledge, authority, & self. These ratings were then merged into a final three digit rating for each respondent. Correlation coefficient for N=46 was .87. Check coding by a third Perry expert was done for every fifth respondent. Interviews were conducted with six respondents to further check ratings.

The interviews were one-half hour long, & were used to get more information on responses that raters judged were unclear. The original protocol asked students to describe their ideal learning environment. The protocol used in the interview proposed a conflict situation regarding knowing/authority/

self and asked students to discuss their reactions to this situation. In each case, the interview rating confirmed the conditional rating given to the original response.

Findings

The ratings for the sample (N=46), the first group analyzed, were distributed in the following way:

TABLE 1

Percentages of Adult Students
on Three Positions of Perry Scheme
of Cognitive Development (N=46)

	No.	Percentage
Dualist	29	63.3%
Multiplist	12	26.0%
Relativist	5	10.8%

Students who were classified as dualist in their view of reality are those who were rated by the Syracuse Rating group as position two and position three. Three ratings on dimensions of knowing, acting and learning environment were assigned to each respondent. Typically a dualist thinker might have a statement in the essay that borders on a higher level. Often students are rated 2-3-3 or 3-3-4 which means that they are in early stages of transition to the next stage. In this sample all students who had position 4 rating in any dimension were included in the multiplist category. From Table 1, 63% of this population has a dualist world view, while only 10.8% or 5 of the respondents were relativists. However from a first sub-set analysis, the students enrolled in business programs had a different profile. Areas represented were Business Administration, Data Processing, Accounting, Computer Science, and Business Counseling. Of the 15 respondents in business programs, the distribution looked like this:

TABLE 2

Percentage of Adult Students on
Perry Scale of Cognitive Development
by Program (N=46)

	N=15 Business Program		N=31 Liberal Arts and Human Services	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Dualist	(7)	46.6%	(22)	70.9%
Multiplist	(6)	40%	(6)	19.3%
Relativist	(2)	13.3%	(3)	9.6%

Although caution must be exercised in generalizing from too small a sample, for this group at least, over 50 percent of students who had made a choice of a business program, were at a multiplist or relativist position on the Perry Scheme. In addition, the business adult students were generally more advanced multiplists, firmly in position four, than the liberal arts/human service adult students. A larger number of these latter students, classified as multiplist, were in the transition toward multiplism.

The age relationships were also interesting since it is a common misconception that growing older accounts for progressive development along dimensions of complexity and internal control, i.e., accepts self as responsible for creating meaning of life's experience. Loevinger's work on ego development puts the majority of late adolescents and adults at the Conformist or Conscientious stage of development or squarely between them (Weathersby, 1981). These ego stages correspond to lower cognitive stages in Perry's theory. Other studies agree with this view. In California, a study of college graduates as adults compared to high school graduates in adulthood found that age and sex did not appear to be critical variables in predicting cognitive development to the higher stages. This study also confirmed that only a small number of college graduates (N=120)

were in the higher Perry positions. (Salyard, 1981) However, a study of ego-stage scores of adult undergraduates in two degree programs at Goddard College and Vermont State College shows adult undergraduates

at remarkably high ego positions on Loevinger's scale, i.e., 81% and 70% respectively at post-conventional stages. (Weathersby, 1981). If post-conventional ego stages correspond to high cognitive positions, these data are inconsistent with other findings on adult students. The data reported here support the thesis that most adults in our society tend to be at the lower levels of cognitive development. According to Loevinger, the self-aware level is the model stopping place for adults in our society. This stage would correspond to transition into multiplism in Perry's scheme. We would have to assume from the inconsistency in some of these studies that descriptions of the relationship of age to development on many dimensions needs careful study. Our data show in the relativist category, the average age was 41 years, yet the range was 28-48 years. Average age for business program relativists was 32; average age of relativists in liberal arts/human services is 45 years. In the multiplist category, the average age was 34.5 years, yet the business program adults showed an average age of 30.6 years while the other programs showed a 37.5 age average. Students enrolled in business programs in general reached a multiplist stage/or relativist stage at an earlier age than the other students in this sample.

The age range for the twenty-nine respondents at the dualist stage is 22-50 years. The group enrolled in business programs averaged 28 years while the other group averaged 36.5 years of age. The results on age are consistent at each position; adult students enrolled in business majors are younger than the other students in the sample and the business majors are generally at a higher stage of cognitive development. One explanation for this result is that because the business students have narrowed their

choice for a career, they also have more self-awareness and are better able to address personal needs, which is a characteristic of a multiplist position. However, almost half of the business students are still in a dualist position.

From this data it is evident that adults returning to school vary considerably along dimensions of cognative filters on reality. This funding has implications for community college instruction. Even though there is diversity within the population of adult students, faculty have been slow to respond to this new clientele. They have been rewarded mainly for teaching content regardless of who attends their classes. With the understanding of different cognitive frames of relationships, faculty can also interpret students' very different responses to course content, academic environments and ability to be successful in their coursework.

Although many more samples need to be drawn from the population of adult students in different institutions to verify their frames of reference, or filters on reality, this sample suggests to us that we approach their instruction in ways consistent with needs for high structure and high reassurance. We would expect students to be dependent on the instructor; to have external orientation; a high need for approval; and an absence of self-awareness of individual learning needs. Students who are dualists will not be capable of self-directed learning, even though they can be encouraged to be more and more self-directed. Peers will be used as helpers to clarify, to remember, to recall.

One example of a dualist learner was a 47 year old woman we interviewed who felt there is an answer "out there". Somebody else will know. In the learning environment she is frustrated because she cannot do what "they" want. When she says during the interview, "you need help", she is distanced from involvement. What she is really saying is "help me", but she is not secure enough to personalize it yet. One almost senses for this student

her view of knowledge is holding her back. She keeps "peeking around the corner" toward the next stage, but cannot turn the corner without more support and security.

Other typical responses of respondents at the dualist perspective were characterized by short, simple sentences, an absence of self, lack of reasoning, and mechanics of learning listed. These respondents blamed instructors for not taking prior learning and experience into consideration in the classroom and in testing; they expressed interest in oral exams and tended to believe that instructors demanded more of returning adult students than from the traditional age student. Authority is seen as very powerful by adults at stages two and three along the Perry scheme.

A student assessed at a stage three position may see the authority as benevolent, helpful and supportive. The authority is there to help the student to do, to teach how to study, how to think; the student is dependent on the instructor to help him learn. Emphasis is on the student wanting to "get it", to receive knowledge.

A student assessed at position four in transition to position 5 responded by setting a context for the self, perceived individual needs, expressed high self-awareness, "what is right for me" tone, logic is evident, reasoning begins with the self, uses qualifiers, and tells why.

A 48 year old woman's view of knowledge, at stage five and moving into the six, was the following summarized response: "I am in the process of making connections, translating what I learn into my own , reflecting on the meaning of what I learn." She said she was responsible for making considered judgments. In her view of self she was taking responsibility as a learner; she can detach and examine herself. Authority is described as helping her to decide by giving guidance, authority is contextually derived and she affirmed the uniqueness of the individual. This respondent is experiencing commitment foreseen in her field which tells that

she is moving to a stage six perspective.

A number of these adult students, with the proper balance of support and challenge, will no doubt progress in cognitive development. They may progress more rapidly than the traditional students because of the experience dimension. What is needed for these students are instructors who look at structural development as a way of organizing the teaching/learning environment. Instructors need to become more flexible in their roles, moving from demonstrating enforcing, to validating the individual student, to being a role model and evaluator of competencies, to being a facilitator or guide for students' emerging levels of insight. Students will also learn from this role flexibility.

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